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John Hill. "It's grown so much over the years. It was initially just the Beta Club participating, and now all the school clubs are participating. They help fundraise money."

"All these kids here today are members of one of those clubs, and they take them around, help them shop, sponsor them and bond with them."

"Former UCHS Principal Ed Rohrbaugh started this several years ago, and it's really just expanded every year. It's a really good program. It's a lot of fun, too."

"It's really good for our kids to help someone out. It helps build character and teaches them how important it is to do for others, especially within your community. I think it makes a really big impact on all the kids involved with the program."

Participating students included members of Beta Club, FFA, Key Club, Interactive, softball, FFA, band, chorus, theater and the Spanish Club.

Together, these students raised more than \$4,500 through concerts, like the Christmas concert hosted through the joint efforts of the band, chorus and theater, and other means to give deserving second-grade kids the opportunity to shop for themselves and their families for Christmas.

While the program is important to help make certain second-graders in the school system experience good Christmas mornings, it's equally beneficial to the high school students who witness the impact this spirit of giving has on the younger kids.

"I think it's been really beneficial to the community because all these kids who might not have Christmas are able to go out and shop and get to know people, as well," said



All the kids were smiling that day, young and younger alike. Photo/Lily Avery

Erin Jarrett, a 12th-grader and Beta Club secretary. "They're allowed to open up to us, and we really get to know them and help them get what they want and need for Christmas."

Following the shopping excursion, all the students returned to the high school for a lunch and games, and everyone made Christmas crafts together and wrapped presents for the children to put under their trees at home.

"I love seeing how happy the kids are when they get to wrap everything up and take it home," said Jarrett. "When we get back to the high school and we get to play together, these kids really enjoy it, and it's so much fun to see that."

The program has grown each year, allowing more second-graders to participate every Christmas season.

Throughout the years, what is most impressive to the students and high school staff is the selflessness of the

second-graders who come in and want to buy only for their family members.

"When you give them an option to shop for themselves, most of them choose not to," said Devin Saunders, an 11th-grader and Beta Club President. "They'll buy stuff for their siblings and for their families. It's such an amazing thing to watch, especially with how young they are."

Everyone involved in Shop With A Panther consider it to be one of the many blessings throughout the community, and even the high school students could not emphasize enough the importance of this season of giving, and the ability to give back to those around you.

"It really opens our eyes because we see how much it helps these kids," said Saunders. "We get to see what these kids need, and it really gives us the opportunity to help them. Not a lot of people our age get to do that."

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early morning hours, playing Christmas classics from the recent Christmas concert from a few weeks back.

According to Principal John Hill, this short hour of celebration and fellowship is only a small expression of his gratitude to the men and women who work at the school.

"I know over the past three and a half years that I have been with you guys, you have taken on a lot of work," said Principal Hill. "You've taken on a lot of initiatives. They haven't been easy. Some of them have been painful and they've all been a lot of hard work."

"It's like with anything else, if it's worth doing it isn't going to be easy. I want to applaud all of you for your efforts and thank you. Your hard work has paid off over and over again. We really do appreciate that very much."

Along with celebrating the yuletide season, Principal Hill used the morning breakfast as a way also to congratulate the faculty and staff for achieving high markers on a recent Georgia school state review, the College and Career Ready Performance Index.

According to the Georgia Department of Education website, CCRPI is a school improvement, accountability and communication platform that will promote college and career readiness for all Georgia public school students. UCHS scored above a 96 for 2016 results, ranking the high school as one of the best schools in the region.

"This is definitely so exciting to me," said Principal Hill. "It's a culmination of all your hard work and effort. It's not just administration, not just teachers - it is the whole staff effort. Every single person in this building is what makes this machine work. There's not one person's job more important than another person's job."

"We're all in this together to take care of these kids and provide them with opportunities and a career. Without one piece in the cog, the machine stops working. I just want to thank everybody for everything that you do and remind everybody how important it is that we work together."

Union County Schools Superintendent Dr. Fred Rayfield also attended the breakfast, offering words of encouragement and congratulations to the teachers, Principal Hill and the staff members for accomplishing such a successful first half of the school year.

"I think it's important that we always celebrate our successes," said Dr.



UCHS faculty and staff were treated to a scrumptious breakfast cooked in the high school cafeteria on Tuesday, Dec. 20. Photo/Lowell Nicholson



On hand to entertain were the Union County Jazz Band and theater teacher Chris Adams.

Rayfield. "We appreciate your contributions. School systems ask their employees and their students to do things sometimes that are extremely difficult, they're time consuming, and in some cases it tests the limit of what all of us have inside of us."

"I think when you finally get to the point as a school and as a system, as you all have done, when you can see the result of that work, you can see the results of that commitment not only in a state report."

"It's really good to look good on a report, and we do. Hopefully, when we see our students and our former students walk down the hall or go to their jobs or go to their universities or go to their technical college, and get employed for the first time after they graduate and become leaders in the community, that surpasses what I see on the report."

Dr. Rayfield went on to praise the teachers for not only their accomplishments with the CCRPI, but in how they are directly responsible for the increasing successes of students coming out of the high school.

According to Dr.



Dr. Fred Rayfield, Union County Schools Superintendent

Rayfield, it takes a dedicated and passionate teacher to inspire students to strive for achievement, and UCHS has that in abundance.

"It is very evident that we've established this culture of compassion and dedication in Union County," said Dr. Rayfield. "It's very evident that culture exists at Union County High School. I hope it feels great, from a faculty and staff perspective, to be one of the best schools in the state."

"I want to express my gratitude, because I know that it is hard work. The Rayfield Family wishes you and your family a very merry Christmas and a happy new year."

Correction

In the Dec. 21 edition of the *North Georgia News*, the newspaper twice misquoted incoming District 8 State Rep. Matt Gurtler in a story concerning his visit with constituents during a meeting of the Mountain Movers and Shakers at Mary's Southern Grill in Young Harris on Friday, Dec. 16.

1) In the meeting, Rep. Gurtler told constituents that in the upcoming legislative session he intends to attempt a repeal of the \$5 nightly hotel/motel fee that's currently being assessed in the state. The *North Georgia News* reported Rep. Gurtler as saying that such a repeal would bring \$168,000 back into the private sector.

What he actually said was that it would bring \$168 million back into the private sector.

2) In that same Dec. 16 meeting, Rep. Gurtler announced his plans to vote against the upcoming state budget to fight back against spending he views as having gone way too far outside the proper role of government. Wasteful and inappropriate government spending, especially corporate welfare and handouts, said Rep. Gurtler, is something that runs counter to his limited government conservative principles.

In considering his upcoming vote against the 2018 state budget, Rep. Gurtler stated that:



Incoming District 8 State Rep. Matt Gurtler

"I do think I'm going to be alone in this, but as John Adams said, you have to stand on your principles, even if you stand alone."

The newspaper previously reported Rep. Gurtler's quote incorrectly as beginning with "I don't think..."

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